February 2001

Acquisitions in a Wired World: Where Are We Going?

Rick Anderson

University of Nevada, serialsonline@unr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Anderson, Rick (2001) "Acquisitions in a Wired World: Where Are We Going?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 10.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3330>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Acquisitions in a Wired World: Where Are We Going?

by **Rick Anderson** (Electronic Resources/Serials Coordinator, The University Libraries, University of Nevada, Reno, 1664 N. Virginia St., Reno, NV 89557; Ph: (775) 784-6500 x.273; Fax: (775) 784-1328) <rickand@unr.edu>

This is a frightening time to be a thirty-something acquisitions librarian. Convention dictates that I follow up that statement by saying that this is also a very exciting time to be a thirty-something acquisitions librarian, but I'll tell you what: it's mainly just scary. I worry a lot about what's going to become of the work I love over the next ten, twenty, thirty years – not just because I love the work and will miss it if it disappears, but also because I need the work in order to feed my family and I wonder whether the work I'm doing now is preparing me well for the work that will need to be done ten, twenty, thirty years from now.

Here's a very frightening question, but it's one that I think each of us in this profession needs to be asking of him or herself. If I'm concerned about the future of acquisitions work, and maybe of librarianship in general, for whom am I scared? Am I scared that libraries will disappear or become unrecognizable and that patrons will then no longer be able to get services that they need, or am I scared that libraries will disappear or become unrecognizable and then I'm going to have to look for another job? It can be hard to look clearly at our own motives and answer that question honestly, but I think we have to because the actions that we take now are going to help shape the future of libraries. If those actions are guided by concern for patrons, I think libraries have a bright future; and if libraries have a bright future, so do librarians. If our actions are guided by fear for our professional future, we risk making decisions that are designed to protect the status quo, and that may doom us to the very fate we're most afraid of.

Actually, I think the best case scenario is pretty good, and I think it's one that is realizable if we use our heads. Despite changes in the information marketplace that many have seen as dangerous to libraries and librarians, I'm slowly becoming more confident that libraries – and, indeed, libraries very much like the ones we know now – will continue to exist for a very long time. Furthermore, I'm also convinced that there will be acquisitions work in the future, and that in many ways it will be roughly similar to the acquisitions work we're doing today. Given the current low-grade panic that seems to suffuse the library and publishing professions these days, those predictions may sound a bit reckless, so I'd like to try to back them up. I don't claim that most of these thoughts are very original, but I think this is a good time and place to reiterate them.

First of all, let's think about libraries generally. In an information world increasingly dominated by technologies that facilitate decentralization, what future could the library as a central institution possibly have? To answer that question, we have to look beyond the physical manifestation of the library (or what it traditionally *is*) and examine its purposes (or what it traditionally *does*). A library's physical manifestation has always been a function of its purpose; that's why, throughout the many years that information has been primarily published in paper formats, libraries have always been physical places. But in and of themselves, paper formats don't have anything to do with a library's purposes, so there's no real reason to believe that the decline of paper publishing has to mean a decline in the importance of libraries as institutions. Let me back up a second and talk about what it is a library does. I'd sum it up in this way: A library is the institutional means by which a community acquires, organizes and distributes access to information on behalf of its members. Now, bear in mind that a community may be political (like a city), or it may be academic (like a school or university), or it may even be as small as a family. In all cases, the community creates a library by pooling its resources to provide access to more information than any one member would be able to purchase for herself. I want to emphasize here that no matter what the anarcho-utopians and anti-intellectual property activists say, information is never going to stop costing money, because those who produce it will always insist on getting paid. It's tempting to believe that the Internet is going to make it possible for everyone to have access to all the information there is at no charge. But until everyone who is currently writing for pay decides to start doing the same amount (and the same quality) of writing for free, that's not going to happen. This means, first of all, that communities will always be expected to provide communal information access to its members; apart from **Bill Gates** and **Ted Turner**, no one is going to be able to afford his own library (at least, not a library comparable to New York City's). And it means, second of all, that communities are going to need trained people to help them organize the information to which they purchase access; information doesn't organize itself any more than it creates itself. Neither of these functions depends on the existence of a physical gathering place.

Now, let me hasten to say that I'm *not* arguing that libraries are going to disappear physically even as they persist virtually,

though I guess that's a possibility. What I *am* saying is that if libraries were to stop existing as physical facilities, that wouldn't mean the end of librarianship.

I'd like to digress on the issue of economics for a minute, and then expand a bit on the issue of cataloging and organization. I said a minute ago that information isn't ever going to be free, because those who create it are always going to insist on being paid. One obvious response to that is, well, what about scholars and academics, who write for free all the time? The fact is that academics do not write for free. They write for a salary. I won't get a check for having written this article, but the State of North Carolina most certainly did pay me to write it, by giving me a salary to come to work 40 hours per week and perform tasks that include writing articles. If writing articles were not a part of my job duties, I can promise you that I wouldn't have written this one on my own time – instead, I'd have written something I could get paid for.

It is significant, though, that academics write and publish stuff for which they are not paid directly. But the significance of that fact has less to do with the economics of information production than it does with copyright issues – since academics don't typically rely on selling their work directly, they consequently don't typically care that much about controlling the distribution of their work; on the contrary, they'd usually like to see it get distributed as widely as possible. That's one reason we see so much friction between librarians and scholarly publishers. Publishers get much of their material for free from academics, and then sell it, often back to the same institutions that paid for the articles to be produced in the first place. This drives many librarians crazy. But if you look beyond the surface goofiness of that arrangement, there's really nothing wrong with it. The publishers are providing a valuable service by vetting, printing and distributing those articles; in a very real sense, the library that purchases a journal filled with content written by its own faculty is just outsourcing the publication process. (Whether the purchase price is fair or not is, of course, an important but separate issue.) Interestingly, the price of scholarly information seems to be going up even as the price of access to non-scholarly information is going down – I can now

continued on page 28

read the *New York Times Book Review* for free on the Web, but the price I'm paying for an **IDEAL** subscription is increasing by 8 percent next year. Why is that? Mainly because the Internet is a great forum for advertisers. The *NYTBR* may be free to me, but that doesn't mean that the *New York Times* isn't getting paid – it means the *New York Times* is getting paid by advertisers who want me to see their messages.

This brings us to the issue of organization. The Internet may well make information cheaper to end users – in fact, it already has – but by so doing it's also making much more of it available, which exacerbates the need for what we have traditionally called "cataloging." Is cataloging going to be the same thing ten years from now that it has been for the last hundred years? I certainly hope not. I don't think I'll court too much controversy here by saying that the LC and Dewey systems, impressive as they are, are completely inadequate to the organizational tasks ahead of us. I'm convinced that future cataloging models will have much more to do with relationship trails between documents than with categories, but that's a topic for a different forum. Here's another interesting thought, though: Suppose that at some point in the future we get to a point where advertising underwrites all information production. So in a sense, all information becomes "free" to end users – they pay with their attention instead of with money. Even in that scenario, two things become pretty obvious: first, some form of copyright control will need to endure, because what advertisers pay for is the ability to draw people to their advertising. Advertisers won't pay if you can't deliver readers, and publishers can't deliver readers unless they can control the availability of their content. Second, there will continue to be a need for publicly-funded entities to organize information in a way that benefits the public, since the marketplace will push organization schemes that merely maximize profit.

I've clearly strayed a bit from the acquisitions arena, so let me drag myself back to it. There are some who worry that a move from paper to electronic formats will lead (indeed, is leading) to a move away from an "ownership" model to an "access" model in libraries, and that this move is going to hurt patrons. I disagree, for one simple reason: that type of thinking betrays a misunderstanding about the library's place in the information economy. Libraries have *never* "owned" the information they distribute. All we've ever provided is access – we don't own the content in our books any more than we own the

content in our online databases. What's changing now is not the degree of ownership, but the format of access. I don't want to minimize the importance of the format question – it has serious ramifications for ease of use, for copyright law, for long-term archiving – but I do believe that it's an issue less fundamental to librarianship itself than we sometimes think.

So let's suppose that in the future, all academic publishing will be done online. Will libraries still need an acquisitions staff? And if so, what will they do? It seems to me that the answer to the first question is definitely "yes." Since information is never going to be entirely free, libraries are still going to have to choose what information to purchase, and they're going to need purchasing agents who know how to go out into the publishing world and bring stuff back with them, and who can then

turn around and deliver that stuff in a coherent way to the folks who organize it and who help patrons find it. We're still going to be ordering, even if ordering really means "setting up access." We're still going to be claiming, even if claiming becomes a matter of saying "Why can't I access your product?" rather than "Why isn't your product in my hands?" We're still going to be making sure that invoices reflect the charges previously agreed to. Increasingly, we're going to be negotiating license terms. Increasingly, we're going to be coordinating the technical specifications of online products with those who sell them. In short, libraries will still need people who can purchase access to information and make sure that that access is delivered appropriately and on time. That is what we have always done with paper products, and I believe it's what we will continue to do with electronic ones.

A Short History of Academic Library Bookselling in America: Or A Tale of the Two Richards

by **Daniel P. Halloran** (President and CEO, Blackwell's Book Services, 6024 SW Jean Rd., Bldg. G, Lake Oswego, OR 97035; Ph: 503-684-1140 x.1201) <dan.halloran@blackwell.com>

This short history of bookselling to academic libraries in America can be written in three chapters. Chapter I is not so much bookselling, as book buying from the academic librarian's perspective. Prior to the 1950's, those of us who were around, were around to serve the needs of the public library market and some of us, like **Blackwell's of Oxford**, to serve the academic needs of a university town and the export trade. This early period was about collection development and less than ideal acquisitions facilities.

Chapter II, and the origin of my subtitle: "A Tale of the Two Richards" begins in the late 1950's and the early 1960's, and of course the two Richards are **Richard Abel** and **Richard Blackwell**. These two men are primarily responsible for English language academic bookselling as we know it today. One, Richard Abel, is responsible for approval plans, standing orders, comprehensive firm order services and the beginning of shelf-ready processing. The other, Richard Blackwell, had the vision to expand bookselling from the narrow Oxford-based university bookstore to an internationally known bookseller serving academics worldwide through retail, library wholesaling, mail order and publishing. These two Richards shaped all of the modern, academic booksellers.

Chapter III, today, is a direct result of the work done by academic booksellers over the past forty or more years, and the economic needs of the librarians we serve. Tightening budgets, the reversal of the split between money spent for books versus that spent for journals, and the availability of affordable computer technology has led booksellers to offer the highest levels of service and efficiency libraries have ever seen.

Chapter I. Prior to the 1950's, the most interesting collection development was being done at those institutions of higher learning with the largest budgets (whether from tax dollars or wealthy donors at private universities). These libraries could afford to pay for large, first-class staffs of individual subject bibliographers. Their collection development excellence was in the hands of trained and educated professional bibliographers. It was up to them not only to build the complete collection based on currently published books, most often ordered directly from individual publishers, but it was also in their hands to ferret out the old, rare and out-of-print titles which were missing from their collections. Often, these bibliographers had close personal relationships with bookshops and distributors around the world. Often, they would travel the globe to meet with their col-

continued on page 30